

cuba

PERSECUTION 101



Despite constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, Cuba's communist Díaz-Canel regime has dedicated itself to stamping out independent religion

The Catholic church in Cuba dates back over 500 years with about 60% of the country's population following that religious tradition today. By contrast, communism is a relative newcomer, entering the political scene in the mid 1900s. Still, that has not stopped successive communist governments from attempting to stifle religion through draconian surveillance, harsh restrictions on religious gatherings, and an unending campaign of violence and intimidation against clergy. The situation has sharply deteriorated in recent years as the government institutes a broad crackdown on civil society, the media, and independent thought in every corner of society.

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QUICK FACTS

Type of Government
Communist

Head of Government
President and First Secretary Miguel Díaz-Canel

Total Population
Approx. 10.98 million

Religious Demography
60% Catholic - 6.59 mil
17.6% Folk Religion - 1.93 mil
5% Protestant - 549,000
17.4% Other1.91 million

Ethnic Demography
64.1% White
26.6% Mixed
9.3% Black*

*As self-identified in the 2012 national census, via the CIA World Factbook



TYPES OF PERSECUTION

Government Restrictions

The Communist Party of Cuba has instituted a complex web of legal restrictions on the church, complemented with harsh punishments and enabled by the lack of an independent judiciary or a competing political party.



ICC IN CUBA

ICC does not conduct programming in Cuba as it falls outside ICC's geographic focus areas, but ICC does work with advocacy partners in Washington, D.C. and beyond that promote religious freedom in Cuba.



Backgrounder on Religious Freedom in Cuba

When Fidel Castro and the Communist Party took over Cuba in the mid 1900s, it declared Cuba an atheist state and began a long war against religion that continues to this day. Castro was openly hostile to the church, persecuting it and prompting leaders of Catholic church in Cuba to quickly issue a public condemnation of communism. Many believers were forced to flee the country, and with persecution especially severe for leaders of the church some estimate that as many as 80% of church leaders fled.

While changes in the early 1990s softened the country's official stance toward religion—religious persons were allowed to join the party, the country was redefined as secular rather than atheist, and religious freedom was enshrined in the constitution—persecution of the church continued.

Cuba lacks an independent judiciary and operates a single-party political system, leaving the Communist Party with all the power. Over the years, it has used that power to create a web of legal restrictions on religious practice, largely regulated by the Ministry of Justice and the Office of Religious Affairs (ORA), which closely regulates religions despite constitutional guarantees of separation between church and state.

From church registration to building permits to funding and travel, the Ministry of Justice and the ORA together control nearly every aspect of religious life in Cuba. Religious groups regularly report difficulty registering, with officials requiring an intimidating array of information from groups seeking to worship legally. The penal code states that membership in or association with an unregistered religious group is a crime and reserves especially harsh penalties for leaders of these groups.

Applications for official registration are often denied, and the process is used as a tool to favor groups seen as more favorable to the government while criminalizing groups that may criticize the government.



Even if a church is able to obtain registration from the Ministry of Justice, it still faces a battery of rules and regulations and must request permission from the ORA for any activities outside of its normal church service including, according to a 2023 report from the U.S. Department of State, “receiving foreign visitors, importing religious literature, purchasing and operating motor vehicles, and constructing, repairing, or purchasing places of worship.”

As in other communist countries, Christians in the country operate a network of house churches. The government attempts to regulate these as well, requiring house churches to submit detailed information about the church and its attendees to authorities and disallowing multiple house churches of the same denomination within a certain distance of each other.

In recent years, Cuba has increasingly targeted clergy with imprisonment, false charges, and forced exile. According to NGO organization CSW, documented incidents of persecution in Cuba doubled from 2021 to 2022 and a study by the Cuban Observatory of Human Rights found 68% of respondents report that they or someone they know has been persecuted for their faith.

The U.S. Department of State has included Cuba on its Special Watchlist since 2019, a designation given to countries with especially concerning records of religious persecution. In 2022 it moved Cuba to its Countries of Particular Concern list, a serious measure designed to punish particularly severe violators of religious freedom.

Resources and Reports

State Department 2022 Report on International Religious Freedom – Cuba Chapter

USCIRF 2023 Annual Report – Cuba Chapter



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